

ANTAGONISTIC DISCOURSES ON SHAMANIC FOLKLORE IN MODERN CHINA

Chiriță Andreea*

andreea.chiri@gmail.com

Abstract: *This paper aims to analyze from a socio-political perspective a series of distinct anthropological visions regarding folklore studies in modern China. The shamanic practices have been undergoing a flabbergasting process of revival inside contemporary China, therefore academic studies on the topic in both China and the Western world flourished accordingly. Most of the academic studies tend to analyze this amazing Sino-shamanic boom from a post-colonial perspective, thus putting a lot of emphasis on cultural specificity and difference, meant to enrich and add more diversity to the global spectrum of shamanic and folklore studies, as it is the case with the Western scholarship; on the other hand, the Chinese scholarship, while massively focusing on the singularity of different shamanic practices in modern China, nevertheless, places these cultural paradigms within the larger context of Chinese identity, as a tool meant to prove the continuity and variety of modern China as a whole, united nation, as it is the case with the Chinese scholarship.*

Keywords: *shamanism, China, folklore, Chinese minorities*

I shall first go back to the beginning of shamanism in China, more specifically to the pre-Han period, followed by the Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD), the most marked by Confucianism Chinese era, when shamanism is almost “wiped out”¹; shamanism doesn’t disappear, but it actually overlaps with the latest Han official doctrines or niche ideologies;

* Doctoral student at the University of Bucharest, School of Oriental Studies

¹ See Lidia Ching, “Sun of Heaven in Ancient China” in *Philosophy East and West*, 1987

in the second part of the article I shall focus on the similarities and unique elements recurrent within the cosmology, myths and the shamanic practices specific to some of the most “researched” Chinese minorities, such as *Yi*² or *Qiang*³, and on the way in which the shamanic imaginary finds viable correspondences within the social practices of modern society. The last part of the article provides an evaluative discourse on the methodologies and techniques used by the two schools of thought mentioned above and on the way in which these different perspectives subscribe to the larger and more complex discourse of uniqueness and cultural emancipation, on one hand, and on the need to embed all cultural differences in one single cultural episteme, as a symbol of nationalism, on the other.

1. Conceptual classifications

A series of the studies analyzed for this article are plainly ethnographic, descriptive, and focus on shamanic practices and mythical imaginary that are specific to Chinese minorities⁴; these cultural practices are then theoretically sustained in a manner which doesn't take into consideration the overlapping and complementary influences of other cultures, or, more clearly, these social pills very *en-vogue* nowadays are being historicized independently of the socio-political background of the analyzed communities.

Another important corpus of Western scholarship is strongly politicized and perceives the discursive or representational practices they

² Ethnic group in South China, living mainly in the mountainous regions of Sichuan and Guizhou, possessing their own writing system dating back 900 years;

³ Han Chinese classification for an ethnic minority living in the northwest of Sichuan province, allegedly the descendants of the mythical Qiang people but strongly Sinicized during the last centuries;

⁴ See, for example, Mark Bender, “Tribes of Snow: Animals and Plants in the Nuosu *Book of Origins*”, *Asian Ethnology*, Vol. 67, No.1 (2008), p. 5-22

analyze like a new form of euphemistic disapproval with and protest against the Chinese state policies, policies which are allegedly meant to “annihilate the identity and unique features that define the Chinese minorities”⁵. The exotic shamanic practices become, accordingly, a form a cultural emancipation, in the context of the Chinese central state policies concerned with creating a discourse of a whole, monolithic but diverse Chinese country.

On the other hand, the Chinese scholarship, although strongly sustained scientifically, take a multidisciplinary hermeneutical approach to the matter, while placing the Chinese minorities’ shamanic cultural practices within one of the multilayers of Chinese culture, stressing its millenary long history and especially uninterrupted continuity; the Chinese scholars are obsessively looking for the uniqueness, specificity, and the exotic that frame all ethnic minorities cultures in China, all these elements being then integrated in an exemplary fashion in the metaphor of the river as a symbol of Chinese culture and history⁶.

All conceptual paradigms are regularly focusing on the ethnic minorities imaginaries, because, regardless of the origin of the researching school, for Western and Chinese scholars alike, notions such as folklore, imaginary, myth, shamanism, are all fascinating locations that are strictly defining “the other”. As far as the Chinese folklorists are concerned, ethnic minorities’ shamanic practices, etc. all represent cultural layers endowed with amazing variety which derives from ethnic groups’ special inter-social practices; only after these unique socio-cultural practices receive the influence of the Han majority population do the ethnic groups along with their practices become stylized, almost “high-culture”, thus

⁵ See, for instance, the anthropological work of Stevan Harl, *Perspectives of the Yi In Southwest China*, University of California Press, 2001

⁶ See Remi Mathieu “Chamans et Chamanisme en Chine Encienne”, *L’Homme*, 27 Anne, no. 101, Jan-Mar, 1987, p. 10-37, but especially Stevan Harl, *Perspectives of the Yi*, 2001, who makes a harsh critic of the Chinese government for trying to assimilate the Yi into the larger discourse of the Greater China.

contributing to the birth of a new syncretic discourse, according to which everything, all other cultural patterns simply melt into Confucianism.

The last category of studies gets back to the pre-Han shamanism because, when analyzing Chinese shamanism *per se*, all scholars go back to the past, to the semi-legendary Chinese dynasties; that is because contemporary shamanism is considered a strictly ethnic minority, romantic business. It would be nevertheless unjust to give such a simplistic cultural account to these academic studies. Shamanic divinatory practices during pre-Han, dreams interpretation, geomancy, incantations to Gods etc. are all to be found in a more intellectualized shape within the esoteric Daoism or philosophical discourse of Daoism.⁷ Moreover, even the ritual practices regarding the cult of the ancestors or the sacred legitimacy of the “divine functionaries”⁸ ruling during the Confucian doctrine hegemony are in fact mere selections from the shamanic discourse during Shang dynasty (1600-1050 BCE), stylized by the pragmatism of high-culture. What Confucianism is actually doing is to get rid of the dysfunctional, “superstitious”, “vulgar” and “unsocial” features of old shamanism⁹.

One witnesses therefore a rupture from the Confucian orthodoxies as far as the shamanic studies are concerned, during the post-Han; nevertheless, these cultural practices continue uninterrupted their cultural trajectory inside the communities of common people. Daoism

⁷ *ibidem* 6

⁸ Name given by Andre Levi in his work “Les Fonctionnaires Divins”, (trad., Ed Armacord, 2001) to the mandarins making up the complex bureaucratic apparatus during Imperial China.

⁹ Confucius himself highly rejects any cultural paradigm based on the supernatural, proto-metaphysics, or whatever considered not palpable or grounded in reality, see *The Analects*.

recovers the shamanic discourses kept by commoners within very precise, functional and philosophical discourses¹⁰.

On the other hand, the shamanic practices that China gets in touch with from Han to Qing dynasty (1644-1912) are, with the risk of infuriating the post-colonialists avid of uniqueness, integrated within the Confucian doctrine corpus; they undergo a process of ritualization that gives them a rather intellectual aura, as it is the case with the Yuan theatre masks.

2. Discourses of pre-Han shamanism as proto-Confucian instances of the ritual function of historic emperors

As a religious practice during pre-Han China, shamanism does not only provide the contemporary scholars with an important corpus of texts that justify the cosmological vision and founding myths which are at the basis of the Chinese imaginary, but they are integrated in the very official political discourse during Shang and Zhou (1046-256 BC) dynasties. According to Lidia Ching, the shaman class, 巫, the invocatory class, 祝, and the divinatory class, 卜, all occupy a special status in the social hierarchy, as they all carried precise official functions inside the bureaucratic system at the imperial court. The Ministry of Rites 大宗拍 displays and offers concrete ritual services officiated by the shamans, meant to drive away the evil spirits of dead people, to implore protection from the Gods who are at the basis of the state founding, as a complementary function to that of the king who is the supreme protector of the “all under heaven” world 天下. Very often, the armed rivalries between tribes would be reflected by the rivalries between the shamans of

¹⁰ See Isabelle Robinet, *Istoria Daoismului*, editura Herald, Bucuresti, 1991 and Remi Mathieu “Chamans and Shamanisme en Chine Encienne”.

the two parties found in conflict, when the most well executed invocations would lead a certain fighting army to victory.¹¹

Pre-Han shamans did not claim divine ancestry, but rather used to be intermediary between the world of spirits, which was unseen, and that of humans, which was tangible. Communication is established with the help of the shaman who is possessed by the invoked spirits; his mission is to repair the dis-functionalities occurred in nature and generated after the sky had been separated from earth, just as it is also the case with the beautifully crafted syncretic cosmology written by prince Huainan. “State Conversations” offers the first narrative examples of shamanic presence in antic China. The female shamans called *wu* as well as the male shamans called *xi* represent the voice of spirits, repair the natural dis-functions, foretell the future based on dreams and the art of divination; Remi Mathieu (1987, p. 23) calls divination “a historical science of the future”, whereas shamans are able to observe the *yin* and the *yang* as well as to practice of the art of divination, as Xunzi calls it in “Conversations between States” (p. 24).

The most important feature of ancient Chinese shamanism is manifested in the ritual function of the emperor. His sacred feature as “The Sun of Heaven” 天子 (Ching, p.16) is put into practice through its very role of supreme shaman. The shamanic function as coordinator of primordial rites comes to legitimize the royal authority of intermediary between heaven, earth and the world of people, as it is also mirrored in *Shujing* or *Lijing*¹²; the emperor himself frames the sacrificial decorum, its positioning and establishes which are the standard incantations, all conceived to bring harmony to his kingdom. The sacrificial services are now ritual practices performed *par excellence* by the king who is placed at

¹¹ Ibidem 2.

¹² Classical Chinese texts translated as *Book of Documents*, dating back to the Warring States Period and attributed to Confucius and various writers and *The Book of Rites*, or *Rites Classic*, classical text in the form of compilation from pre-Han.

the center of the bureaucratic system and is therefore filled with sacred obligations. The legendary emperors and the very first historical kings win their access to the throne based on their moral virtues as well as on their capacities of communicating with the divine.

Later on, Mozi¹³ (470-391 BC) himself would mention the ritual cauldrons *ting*, meant to legitimize the authority of the king. But in China, the sacred character of the king derives from the king's position as an harmonizing negotiator between the two different worlds, unlike the Egyptian or Japanese myths in which the supreme authorities are empowered with purely divine origins, generated by a much more esoteric kind of imaginary.

During the 4th century, after the fall of the orthodoxies pervasive during Han dynasty, the shamanic activities flourish again, just as it happens in “Looking for the Spirits” 寻神记 written by Gan Bao; however in the years to come after this 4th century writing, approaching such an “exotic” topic would be officially considered a niche practice, equivalent to the concept of subculture in nowadays society. “Elegies from Chu” 楚辞 from the Warring States period (ended 221) give shamanic practices in medieval China an aura of lyricism providing at the same time precious documentary information about the social role of the female shamans whose main purpose was that of bringing rain during times of draught; these were all popular practices that couldn't have simply disappear. Here is an example from “Elegies of Chu” that mirror very well their lyric and documentary value:

“Master of Destinies
Open the gate of Heaven
I've lost myself through the dark clouds

¹³ Pre-Han philosopher initiator of the School of Mohism who argued strongly against both Confucianism and Daoism. The reference of the scared bronze vessels serving to legitimize king's rule is made by Lidia Ching in “Son of Heaven: Sacral Kingship in Ancient China”.

I ask the torrents to flood the desert
Master, you and me, we are pure
Let us open a gate to the supreme Master!”¹⁴

It is thus possible that the sacred vision of the pre-Confucian imaginary had only to give up its purely religious and highly dogmatic features, its barbarian and not functional metaphysic during Han dynasty, time when the concept of social efficiency gains its strongest ground throughout the history of the Middle Kingdom.

Shamanism during Classical China doesn't therefore die under Confucian oppression, but it rather gives up its “useless” characteristics or gets absorbed into structures much more engaged intellectually. This probably also generated the discourse of the post-Han Chinese literati with regard to the “sorcery-like”, “barbarian” (Mathieu, 20) practices that can only survive to the peoples equally “barbarian”, practices which, during the era of nation-states had to be canonized, elevated from the status of mere basic isolated social manifestations to that of sub-layer of the all encompassing Chinese culture as a unitary whole.

Conceptualizing shamanism as a folk religion during modern China is not an idea valid exclusively within the ethnic minority groups, as the myriad Western or Chinese studies and researches in this respect would suggest. It is more a matter of theoretical premises on which the Western or Chinese scholarship base their researches. Shamanism in nowadays China originates in the shamanism present as a cultural practice in ex-neighboring ethnic non-Han communities¹⁵ that now belong to China,

¹⁴ Own translation from Chu Ci, “Nine Songs”, by Qu Yuan (343-278 BC).

¹⁵ The fact that only starting with the end of the XIX th century, during Qing dynasty, ethnic minorities considered mere barbarian peoples that far, started “to be taken into serious” academically and politically and little by little integrated into the larger discourse of Chinese-Han-Confucian big nationalist discourse is largely debated in dozens of Histories of China and academic paper, of which I recommend John Keay, *China, a History*, Harper Press, 2008.

practices that did influence the Chinese system of thought; but this “alien” influences have nevertheless been Sinicized and de-barbarized, being considered by the Chinese scholars mere varieties of religious Daoism, unique and special, but connected to a common cultural background which, at a certain time in history, took a different direction from the Confucian orthodoxies. On the other hand, the Western scholars fail to notice amazing similarities between the ethnic minorities and the Han mythological imaginary, similarities that openly imply a vibrant and viable cultural dialogue that might have been existed at a certain time in history between the Han and the other ethnic groups. The Chinese academia works hard to strike a balance between discourses claiming cultural uniqueness of the Chinese multiculturalism and discourses creating a strong consciousness of this cultural uniqueness; Chinese folklore studies forgets to take into account the intercultural dialogue which is at the very base of Chinese culture, so most infatuated with uniqueness and diversity.

3. Common background, social contexts, ontological diversities within the shamanic practices and literatures of the ethnic modern communities in contemporary China

The most basic feature characterizing the present shamanic beliefs in China is *ex-nihilo* creation, as Mark Bender notices very accurately in a commentary to “The Book of Origins”¹⁶, which is a historical canon of Yi population. The content of the book is, surprisingly, impregnated with elements specific to the Han mythology; in fact, dividing China into minorities when it comes to frame up the Chinese imaginary patterns may look absurd and politically incorrect, in the context of a good or sometimes bad cohabitations between them for long centuries. The creator God Guitit Guixnzy creates Heaven and Earth, the ten thousand

¹⁶ See more in “Tribes of Snow: Animals and Plants in the Nuosu Book of Origins”, *Asian Ethnology*, Vol. 67, No.1, 2008, p. 5-42.

things transform themselves and self-multiply, the four cardinal points emerge as well as all things in the natural world that spring up in an amazingly natural fashion. All transformation emerge from void and emptiness under the enchanted looks of the God of Sky, the world gets populated with animals, plants, landscapes and the deities represented by animals create four holes in the sky sustained by four poles meant as a communication bridge between heaven and earth.

Even the myth of archer Yu is recycled under the shape of a golden monkey, animal which actually populates the region of Sichuan where the *Yi* populations are spread out. Annyut Ddussy is the mythical hero of the *Yi* populations; his merit is that of darting to death the tens of suns clustered around the Earth, burning it.

The abundance of totemic animals within the imaginary of the *Yi* populations, the overlapping of dream-like, supernatural facts with reality within the written literatures of this ethnic minority greatly influence the social practices and the way of conceptualizing the phenomenological world of the *Yi*.

Sacrificial animals are also emblemized and encoded as symbols that disclose interesting historical realities regarding the *Yi* populations. The “furry” sheep, closely associated with the *Yi*, is sacrificed through suffocation, whereas the “normal” goat, a Han symbol, perishes in a “barbarian” manner, by being slaughtered.

The hero monkey populates also the *Qiang* mythology, but, in the case of this ethnic group, it rather embodies a kind of Prometheus who steals the fire from the sky and offers it to the common people. Moreover, the *Qiang* myths, place emperor Yu at the origins of this population; emperor Yu, just like in the case of Han mythology, embodies all features specific to an exemplary hero. In the case of both *Qiang* and *Yi*, the shaman represents a spiritual, religious but also political leader, as it is the case with the shamans during the Chinese semi-legendary dynasties. Nowadays, in the context of rethinking new, modern political structures, the shamans have lost their former social and political authority, but they still keep a high level of moral

and intellectual authority that they have over the community they're responsible for. The modern shaman is a priest, a doctor, a teacher etc. and has the mission of passing over to the next generations the *Yi* history and culture. The *Yi* shaman does not embody an authoritarian force that fights ferociously against the central politics of cultural assimilation, as a great number of Western scholars tend to wrongly emphasize in their studies, but rather another, different perspective of the world which has already become an organic part of the collective consciousness of the *Yi*.

In the case of other ethnic groups, shamanism does openly search for the element of uniqueness that would make it visibly different from the assimilating Han culture. This is also the case of the practices and founding mythologies of Manchu people. Their world is organized in structures and tonalities based on odd-numbers, unlike the preference for even, masculine, *yang* numbers that characterize the Confucian paradigm, or the trigrams from *Yijing*. The ontology of these competing worlds is based on the canon of the Heaven-Man-Darkness trine. The Manchurian community also believes in the idea that the soul is structured based on the above-mentioned trine, fully charged with Buddhist resonances. The soul is the consciousness that marks the difference between the living and the world of the dead and represent the ultimate level of spirituality; the *qi*, which lingers at a different, inferior level, turns back to the world of darkness in order to get reincarnated, whereas the soul, part of a superior level, turns back to its primordial origins, to Omosimama, or the Goddess of Descendants¹⁷.

Throughout the analyzed communities, the cult of the ancestors is strongly marked as basis for a good ancestry. In the province of Guangzhou where shamanism has recently undergone a process of surprising revival, the religious Buddhist practices overlap with the

¹⁷ For a detailed description see Lisha Li, "Mystical Numbers and Manchu Traditional Music: A Consideration between Shamanic Thought and Music Ideal", *British Journal of Ethnomusicology*, Vol.2, 1993, p. 99-115.

shamanic practices like a mark of religious-esoteric syncretism, which justifies a natural social reaction to the materialism of modernity. In this province, shamanism is highly institutionalized and the rituals it provides as social services encompass all Confucian beliefs concerning the hierarchies and social relations between sexes, ancestors and descendants; this new cultural paradigm is meant to justify the social failure of ordinary Chinese people, failure which allegedly originates in the rupture from genuine filial piety as well as in women's emancipation and refusal to be obedient to the man. Different shamanic practices, exorcising, the strict delimitations between the responsibilities of female shaman from male shaman are meant to recreate, in the context of mass industrialization, an original, repaired world, but not in opposition to the decadent present, but, somehow paradoxically, as a means of making the human being adapt painlessly to this kind of cruel modern world¹⁸.

4. Critique of the Chinese and Western shamanic studies scholarship

The immense popularity of folklore studies in modern China is a perfectly justified fact from a socio-cultural point of view.

As far as the Western studies are concerned, the popularity of Asian folklore studies has at its origin two clear-cut reasons: one is the eccentric need for exoticism, the creation of an alternative saving discourse as a reaction to the loss of spirituality in the Western world¹⁹, the other, more academically articulate, is that of coming up with new scientific theories meant and capable of decomposing the Chinese imaginary into clear-cut, concrete patterns. Just like in the previous case, it is also the need to discover "the other", to find its unique features while placing it into the larger universal cultural framework, with the risk, as it is the case in post-

¹⁸ See Pui Lam_lau, "The Revival of Folk Religion and Gender Relationship in Rural China: A Preliminary Observation", *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 64, No. 1, 2005, 89-109.

¹⁹ See Peter Sloterdijk, *Eurodaoism*, ed. Amarcord, Timisoara, 2006.

colonial studies, to focus more than it is wise on the differences between cultures, rather than on their similarities.

As far as the Chinese folklore studies are concerned, they go hand in hand with the central policies, like Sue Tuohy²⁰ would notice in an article on the main folklore studies trends in China.

The starting point of almost any ethnographic analysis is unanimously the millenary continuity of Chinese civilization, perceived as a historical entity. The historical past and its mirroring within the practices of the present creates a sense of uniqueness that brings legitimacy to the Chinese state. The immense cultural legacy of China is the central theme and the primordial premises for all folklore studies. China, more than any other country, makes a clear distinction between the popular and the elite culture and creates its own technical criteria on the basis of which it puts value on the authenticity of folk customs and practices. China's cultural tradition is strongly related to power, to legitimizing this (political) power and the two big paradigmatic perspectives (traditional, elitist, intellectual *versus* regional, ethnic, and natural), which are strictly delimited conceptually, try to explain the unity of China through its very duality or rather multiculturalism.

Folklore studies in China embody a scientific multi-functional formula as part of humanities and are perfect tools meant to search for the roots 寻根 (of Chinese civilization) and place them inside "the big museum of Chinese culture" 文化馆. The All under Heaven 天下discourse metamorphoses itself into the nation-state 国家discourse by homogenizing diversities²¹. The uniqueness of a world looked down upon for centuries up to the Republican era (starting with 2011), as it is the case with the Chinese ethnic minorities, is not at all an impediment in creating a legitimizing discourse on the unity and monolithic, uninterrupted millennia of Chinese civilization; the Chinese central official discourse

²⁰ See Sue Tuohy, "Cultural Metaphors and Reasoning: Folklore Ideology and Reason in Modern China", *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 1, 1991, 189-220.

²¹ *Ibidem* 20

encourages and promotes the uniqueness of its ethnic groups like arguments for its very own singularity. The special features of minority ethnic groups are assimilated and eventually melt into the central-state structures like a contribution to the crystallization of a diverse but harmonious whole.

A reflexive, slightly emotional and personalized perspective would probably be more honest, useful and wise.

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